

Weight Gain in Midlife

Weight gain, especially the increased tendency for central fat distribution, is all too common amongst women in midlife. On average, women gain about 2 pounds per year during midlife¹. Many women report weight gain around their transition to menopause and greater difficulty losing weight. This can be very frustrating for women who wish to maintain their weight through menopause **but what may have worked for weight loss in the past may not work now.**

Apart from aging, women in midlife are faced with many aspects of menopause that promote weight gain. These include estrogen deprivation, mood disorders and sleep disturbance^{2,3}.

- ◆ Estrogen deprivation after menopause has been correlated to an increase in total body fat. Especially, an increase in belly fat^{1,99}.
- ◆ Mood changes affect up to one quarter of peri- and post-menopausal women and can prevent adopting lifestyle changes needed to maintain or lose weight³.
- ◆ Women who sleep more than 7 hours every night gain less weight than those who sleep 5 hours or less⁴.

Aging itself also promotes weight gain. As we age, we experience a decrease in lean body mass which leads to a decreased metabolic rate. Aging is also associated with a decrease in physical activity⁴. These decreases in total energy expenditure require that we modify our lifestyles to avoid a positive energy balance that results in weight gain.

Lifestyle Modification

It should first be acknowledged that weight loss often takes longer and requires sustained effort in menopausal women.

Nutrition is a key component in any weight loss effort and there is no one specific dietary plan that is recommended for menopausal weight loss. A change could include reduced consumption of fat and processed foods, smaller portion sizes, or more balance of macronutrients (fat, protein, and carbohydrates). No matter the approach, these dietary changes must be sustainable and nutritionally adequate^{5,6}.

Physical activity is a must in any weight loss effort but this doesn't have to mean a gym membership with lofty weightlifting and endurance goals. This can be simple weekly goals to get at least 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity activity every week^{1,5-7}. This could be taking a brisk walk after work, taking the stairs whenever possible, or taking the time to dance to your favorite song everyday.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)

Menopause is associated with several hormone changes with the most notable being decreased levels of circulating estrogen. Decreased estrogen leads to several changes including genital atrophy and bone loss⁸⁹.

Although HRT has not been found to result in weight loss in women, it has been reported to

favorably alter body composition, most notably an increase in lean body mass and decreased abdominal fat distribution^{1,8}.

Many women use HRT for short-term relief of vasomotor symptoms (hot flashes and night sweats) that are common in menopause. However, Hormone replacement therapy is not recommended for prevention or management of weight gain due to adverse affects related to oral hormone agents including increased risk of stroke and cardiovascular disease^{1,8,9}.

Lifestyle Change Support

There are many resources to help women maintain weight loss in their menopausal years. These are just some suggestions but certainly not exhaustive to the resources available.

- ◆ Calorie counting and macronutrient tracking apps; MyFitnessPal and Lose It!
- ◆ Weight management programs designed specifically for menopausal women; PLATE (designed by ObGyn Dr. Kathryn Wadrep) and Galveston Diet (designed by ObGyn Dr. Mary Claire Haver)
- ◆ Fitness tracker app; Google Fit: Activity Tracking (collaborated with World Health Organization and American Heart Association)

References

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Many women share the frustration of increased weight gain and more difficulty with weight loss in their transition to menopause and beyond.

